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Flight From Mass Culture

The small group of talented students and teachers who foregathered at Vanderbilt in the early 1920's and started a literary magazine began far more than they realized then and perhaps more than they realize even now. They named their magazine *The Fugitive,* and started a giant and often choleric guessing game about the reason for the name. If they were "fugitives," what were they fleeing from? For some reason this question became even more acerbic after four of the original Fugitives had sparked a new movement and acquired a new name, The Agrarians.

There were answers — the Fugitives themselves said they fled nothing more vehemently than the Brahmins of the old South. Their northern critics accused them of fleeing reality, of burying their heads, ostrichlike, in the sand. They were ridiculed as neo-Confederates, as illusionists, as romantic feudalists, as escapists from the healthy realities of modern life. One thing that went almost unnoticed in the general furor was that the Fugitives and Agrarians were in full flight from mass culture. They were fleeing it in the 1920's as Fugitives, in the 1930's as Agrarians, and if we are to judge from their recent reunion at Vanderbilt University in 1956, they are, with one important exception, still in flight from it.

I believe that it is only a matter of justice today to affirm that the Fugitive-Agrarians were correct in sensing the overwhelming power of mass culture and correct in inveighing against its corrupting influence on art, culture, and life in general. I believe that far from being wrong-headed and escapist illusionaries, the Fugitive-Agrarians had a very valid point of view which the experience of the last thirty years has tended to enforce. To make this point clearer let me set up a description of mass culture in the arts. This brief summation is a digest of a recent book, *Mass Culture, Popular Arts in America,* a symposium edited by Rosenberg and White, which in some 650-odd pages analyzes the complex facets of mass culture today. This is the picture which emerges. I give here only the conclusions which the authors reach.

In English culture before the industrial revolution, art appears in two modes — the mode of high art and the mode of folk art. High art is individual, self-conscious art by a known artist possessed of genius to a high degree — a Chaucer, a Milton, a Shakespeare. Folk art arises unselfconsciously from the folk who possess a high sense of community, plus a high sense of individuality. The interaction of these two kinds of art produces a healthy condition in a culture, holding it in a kind of living tension, separating the elite from the folk without breeding rivalry or hatred. The industrial revolution and modern technology upset this balance and generated a third type of art, mass art, designed to palliate the boredom of the masses and condition them to accept the dubious blessings of mass culture.

This mass culture is an homogenized product, reducing its appeal to the lowest common denominator of the masses, then mixing this with a kind of slickness, as in *Life* Magazine, to allure the great middle class audience. Since bad art drives out good (because it makes a more immediate sense appeal to the greatest number of people) it eventually debases the taste of the masses who erect their own debased standard of taste to the position of the controlling norm. This is Gasset's theme in *Revolt of The Masses.* Gradually this mass art reduces the audiences of high art and of folk art and threatens the destruction of both. Its effect is to brutalize the senses, to bore and depersonalize its audience, to contribute to a decline in ethics. Mass media, the great agency of mass art, alienate people from personal experience and intensify their moral isolation. All popular art leaves its audience unsatisfied (we asked for truth and beauty and Mr. Luce gave us Life Magazine). So most mass men today, counselled by mass media, consoled by bureaucratic voices, amused in their leisure by photography, pornography, and Mickey Spillane, still lead lives of quiet desperation. The percentage of such men in our society has risen sharply since Thoreau's classic indictment.

The attack on mass culture by Rosenberg and White in their book summarized above is a severe one; it is clear that the grave deficiencies of mass culture now concern a great many people who were awakened from their dogmatic belief in inevitable progress by their first perusal of George Orwell's terrifying 1984 (even the title of this glimpse into the future of our increasingly abstract society is a number, an abstraction). This paper is an attempt to show the nature and breadth of the attack the Fugitive-Agrarians made upon the worst phases of mass culture.

Consider first the genesis of the Fugitive movement. We have a great deal of light on this genesis through the retrospective comments made at the recent Fugitive reunion (1956). The important point made there was that there was a strong sense of community and even of fami-

lial relationship in the Fugitive movement which insured a healthy traditionalism and a healthy artistic situation, the very atmosphere which a mass culture cannot ever provide. William Yandell Elliot spoke to this point.

"Now I think undoubtedly there is something in the South and there is particularly something in the fact that many of us were kin to each other several generations back. I believe I am a distant kinsman of both Johnny (Ransom) and Andrew (Lytle). And we have a sense of community that goes far deeper than probably most people have in that kind of sense — the people who grew up as boys together, like the Starrs grew up with me . . . . But there was a continuation of a certain robustness, a fundamental traditionalism which cemented us, and a complete independence for . . . no programming. A complete resistance of anybody programming anything."[1]

All the Fugitives agreed to the above comments. They went on to make the further points that Nashville at that time was a small city where everybody knew everybody else, where there was a tradition of talk and where the relations between city and university were informal and reasonably tolerant. The University itself constituted a community where there were a few first rate minds on the faculty to which the students had easy access. The students thus came to know profoundly and well, through formal instruction and through social intercourse, these fine minds. There was a sense of community of university and of small city which seemed unique to the Fugitives as they discussed this in the perspective of thirty years.These men had since studied or taught at many diverse schools — at Oxford, the Sorbonne, Yale, Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, Minnesota, etc. They taught seminars, conducted poetry conferences, advised amateur groups; never, however did they find anywhere else this sense of community, of unforced tradition, of gentility, and of courtliness which they had shared in the Fugitive movement of Vanderbilt. Their very communal origin, their uncompelled and unforced cohesion gave their entire movement from its inception a direction and tone that was anti-collectivist, anti-mass culture.

Their specific attack on mass culture begins with the statement in the prologue to *I'll Take My Stand* that "Industrialism is the economic organization of the Collective American Society," and that, "this industrialism has a dehumanizing and corrupting influence when it completely dominates society." All the twelve contributors to this volume agree that giant industrialism is the villain of the piece; Ransom observing that "Industrialism is a program under which men, using the latest scientific paraphernalia, sacrifice comfort, leisure and the enjoy-

1 Purdy, *Fugitives' Reunion*, pp. 90-1.

ment of life to win Pyrrhic victories from nature at points of no strategic importance." They are especially concerned with the effect of this industrialism on art, making the point that art suffers; that "neither the creation nor the understanding of works of art is possible in an industrial age." Davidson in his essay, "A Mirror for Artists," elaborates this theme at great length. He argues that the complete ascendancy of industrialism will mean that there are no arts left to foster. In the industrial society arts are luxuries to be bought and placed in a museum which isolates them from normal living. In an agrarian society the arts belong as a matter of course in the routine of daily life and are so employed by the folk. Industrialism's mass production and distribution has meant primarily the distribution of bad art (*kitch*) for profit, thus debasing the taste of the masses. Davidson's conclusion is that the artist's chief hope today is to cease to be the pure artist withdrawn comfortably from the practical world. He must enter as a person into the struggle to repudiate industrialism's supremacy in society and to retain some of the virtues of a provincial, conservative, and agrarian society.

The Fugitive-Agrarians noted also the debasement of language, the medium of literature, by our mass culture. The advent of printing has not been an unmixed blessing since mass communication has been one of the chief agencies in the formation of the mass mind. Tate spoke up to say, "We've got constant pressure from all sorts of directions in this, in this high-powered commercial, technological situation which corrupts the language. Every word that appears in the newspaper or over the radio is debased . . . . T. S. Eliot translates the phrase from Mallarme 'to purify the language of the tribe! That's what every modern poet has got to do, because in the pre-nineteenth-century cultures there wasn't so wide a gap between common speech—the so called man in the street, or Wordsworth's ideal peasant — and the educational man . . . . It's simply that the words in common usage in the ordinary human affairs, day after day are debased by sociology, commercialism, and what not."[2] Tate goes on to say that for the poet today, "It's a choice between literary poetry or none at all; the canned poetry manufactured for a super-bourgeois society."[3]

The depersonalizing, abstract effect of mass culture became one of the primary terms of the Fugitive-Agrarian attack. All of them speak strongly on this. Tate led off by his general remark that "Only a return to the provinces, to the small self-contained centers of life, will put the all-destroying abstraction America to rest."[4] Ransom continued

2 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
3 *Ibid.*, pp. 26-7.
4 Hart, *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, p. 6.

this theme by observing, "It is into precisely these intangibles i.e., a pile of money, a volume of produce, a market or a credit system that industrialism would translate the farmer's farm. It means the *dehumanization* [my italics] of his life."[5]

Owsley remarked that the Agrarians held ". . . a belief that the high powered modern industrialization and materialism would not either develop or maintain a civilization long . . . . The Fugitives revolted against . . . stereotyped forms of living and thinking."[6]

Warren made the most complete statement on this subject. "Before we got in the last war, there was the period of unmasking blank power everywhere. And you felt that all of your work was irrelevant to this unmasking blank power everywhere. And you felt that all of your work was irrelevant to this unmasking of this brute force in the world – that the dehumanizing forces had won. . . . There are two questions: one, the sense of the disintegration of the notion of the individual in that society we're living in . . . and the relation of that to Democracy. It's the machine of power in this so-called democratic state; the machines disintegrate individuals, so you have no individual sense of responsibility and no awareness that the individual has a past and a place . . . . But for me it [the Agrarian movement] was a protest . . . against certain things; against a kind of dehumanizing and disintegrative effect on your notion of what an individual person could be in the sense of a loss of your role in society . . . in the power state[the individual] lost existence, disappeared, was a cipher. We were trying to find a notion of democracy which would make it possible for people to be people and not be bosses or exploiters . . . but to have a community of people rather than a community of something else."[7]

It seems clear enough from the foregoing evidence that the Fugitive-Agrarians did mount a massive attack on mass culture and its degrading and enslaving attributes. A vast amount of documentation could be adduced to add to the above statements. To assess the value of that attack is far more difficult. I suppose no exact assessment can ever be made. There are certain puzzling factors in the Fugitive-Agrarian history which should be brought up here before a conclusion is drawn for this paper. Let me state them quickly.

One of the most obvious anomalies of the movement was that of the four key figures who were the heart of the Fugitive-Agrarian

5 *I'll Take My Stand*, p. 20
6 *Fugitives' Reunion*, pp. 205-6.
7 *Ibid.*, pp. 208-14 passim.

movement, three — Ransom, Tate, and Warren — moved north, "fled" as their unfriendly critics said to the very culture they had been anathematizing. The South seemed to offer little encouragement or sustenance to them. The best academic appointments seemed to lie in the very region which they had condemned, and the North received them and absorbed them without any particular rancor or outcry. Only Davidson resisted the appeal of greener academic pastures and remained at Vanderbilt defending vigorously the principles which some of his confreres seemed to have dropped or yielded. Davidson has always seemed the staunchest and most committed of the group in his devotion to the "Southern" way, and even today he does not seem to have yielded the positions he took up in the 1920's and 30's.

William Elliot, who was a Fugitive but not an Agrarian, went north to Harvard where he made a fine reputation as a political scientist and where he continued to fight the mass mind, as he testified at the Fugitive's Reunion. "I am trying to get a 'Roundtable of the Republic' to make some head against this mass attitude — to select the best in our society, to get an elite for a model once more back into being — which, it seems to be, is the point towards which Fugitives would naturally head as a problem."[8] This clearcut statement seems completely in consonance with the Fugitive-Agrarian opposition to mass culture. Note then, the surprising position taken by Ransom in the same discussion. "But my feeling is that we are faced with a new culture in this country, that the strings that bound us to Europe are all gone. Anybody who teaches English knows that the Department of English goes down steadily and proportionately in the appeal which it makes to students. I introduced into my house . . . a television set last summer. I use it to go slumming. And I must confess that I think it's very healthy that we are starting all over here in this country with a kind of culture which is based on *mass consumption* [my italics]."[9]

This is a strange statement indeed for one frequently spoken of as the ideological leader of the Fugitive-Agrarians. By this statement he seems to withdraw all that his leadership has stood for. Yet, it is a key statement and explains, I think, many of the ambiguities of the Fugitive-Agrarian movement which have puzzled outsiders. Ransom's basic intellectual stance is that of Vaihinger, the philosopher of "as if." Ransom makes this clear in his *God Without Thunder* when he justifies orthodox religion as a useful myth, one which does not have ontological validity but serves a useful psychological function. You should accede

8 *Ibid.*, p. 197.
9 *Ibid.*, pp. 192-3.

to it not because it's true in an absolute sense but because it organizes your social and aesthethic and ethical life in an orderly and helpful fashion. This is analogous to the Arnoldian strategy and is ultimately, it seems to me, a defeating and sterile concept.

This complete defection of Ransom — the lost leader of the Agrarians — is one of the strangest phenomena to emerge from the recent history of the movement. Why he chose to do this I do not know; I doubt if his closest associates know. In the light of what we know now it seems clear that his departure north to Kenyon College around 1938 was symbolic of his inner change. He left Vanderbilt, he left the South and by 1943 in an article in the *Kenyon Review* he repudiated Agrarianism itself as a rather naive fantasy. By 1954, also in the *Kenyon Review,* he is renouncing the religious humanism of the Agrarians for the secular humanism of Wallace Stevens, and by 1956 he is joyfully embracing a new culture based on mass consumption. This, I repeat, is the strangest phenomenon in the entire movement. Davidson, of course, and Tate and Warren have steadfastly resisted all the allurements of mass culture.

In conclusion, then, what can we say of the future? We can say that the odds are heavily on the side of the gray and faceless man-swarm — the lonely crowd. Each day the tide of lowest common denominator culture rises higher and higher about the little islands of traditional culture — the Fugitive-Agrarians are such an island. But one day the tide will cover them. It won't be an apocalyptic day; our culture islands will not end with a bang. Like Winston Smith in the conclusion of Orwell's novel 1984, we will still be alive, if you can call such an existence living — we too will see the face of *Big Brother* and suddenly we'll feel a warm glow and know that we no longer hate him — we love *Big Brother.* If this is the world of the future, it is a world that the Fugitive-Agrarians never made.